

College Football Playoff Media Conference

Wednesday, January 3, 2024

Irving, Texas, USA

Coach Kalen DeBoer

CFP Media Conference



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BRETT DANIELS: I'd like to welcome everyone to today's call. Joining us today is Washington head coach Kalen DeBoer.

At this time I'd like to turn it over to Coach for a few opening remarks.

KALEN DEBOER: Appreciate you all being here with us. We are back in Seattle, just honored to be representing our team here in the National Championship, and just congratulations and tip of the hat to Coach Harbaugh and Michigan. Amazing season they've had, and just a lot of domination all year long.

Well-fought win against Alabama in the Rose Bowl.

We are looking forward to the challenge, looking forward to everything that comes along with the National Championship here in the days ahead, and our preparation, especially with the coaching staff and the game planning is going strong already.

In a couple days we'll be back down in Houston, and really looking forward to that, flying down there.

I'll open it up for questions.

Q. How is Dillon Johnson doing, and what did you see happen to him at the end of the Texas game?

KALEN DEBOER: Yeah, I mean, I haven't seen him today. I know that we got back yesterday, and they continued to look at him and had a report with our training staff today. This is just something he's been working through for a couple months now and just played through it.

There's nothing as far as above and beyond what's happened in the past. Just kind of throughout the game, he'd reaggravate it and shake it off and go back out there and play. I guess my thoughts is he'll be ready to go. Obviously it's a quick week, quick turnaround, only seven days to get ready again.

We'll be smart with how we prepare, and I guess that's my assumption not having talked to him today, but even knowing where we landed, as long as everything came out all right with everything, he was going to do everything he could to be on that football field next Monday.

Q. How important is he to your team and what you guys do on offense?

KALEN DEBOER: Yeah, I think he's just really established himself the second half of the season, both at running the football, which I know was everyone's theme, just the big games he's had and the physicality he brings.

He is very much in sync with our offensive line. Trusts them a lot, they trust him, and go the extra mile to pave the way for him to get the yards he has.

I think the other piece is we have other guys that do a really good job, too, but he is just a solid player all around and does a solid job of pass protection and keeping the pocket clean for Mike, smart football player, understands his responsibilities, but physically able to take on all the different types of bodies that come at him pressure-wise or just helping in protection.

Him being a first-year guy with us, he's really the second half of the year come along as the reps have added up, and he gets more opportunities.

He's a big piece to it. I don't think I'd be able to sell it any other way. I think everyone would see through that.

We have other guys that are ready to go if he's not able to step out there, but Dillon is I know going to do everything he can because he's putting his heart and soul into this season, this team all year long.

Q. Kalen, there will be a lot of defining moments for you guys this season, whether it be Grady's walk-off, the 4th down conversion against Washington State, Mish's interception, the list is pretty extensive. I'm curious if there's one or two plays this season that really stand out to you and why those might stand out in particular.

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KALEN DEBOER: Yeah, there have been, obviously a lot of close games come a lot of big moments and big plays. You can go with the ones that kind of got the big run going for us as far as the stretch, and that would probably be the 4th down stop against Oregon here at home in the regular season, and then being able to turn that into a touchdown to Rome Odunze soon after, and of course the missed field goal.

I know that's more than one again, but to me that stretch of just a couple minutes, just the trajectory we were on and just how that kind of propelled us into kind of taking over the top spot in the conference.

I think you go to the end of the season and just finishing it off with the touchdown and scoring drive in the Apple Cup after converting on 4th down and the field goal by Grady Gross there.

Then I think there's just the next step and level of just our guys grinding and some of the big plays that we made, a lot of big plays. It's not one play, but it's just a group of things that have happened in the Pac-12 Championship and the Sugar Bowl, just the way the guys work through third and fourth quarters, just keep grinding, keep fighting.

Each piece adds to the experiences we have and the way they trust and believe in each other on another level.

Q. Kalen, I know you've got bigger fish to Friday right now with the immediate situation playing Michigan, but have you considered at all just the fact that this is going to be a Big Ten match-up here starting next season and just the future and how this elevates the Big Ten, being able to say they have the national champion coming into 2024 one way or another?

KALEN DEBOER: I hadn't until really yesterday kind of -- someone else had asked the same question. Yeah, certainly they're on our schedule a year from now and it's a whole different deal that we'll be involved with as far as new conference.

I think this year where we're at right now in the season, this is all about really us representing the Pac-12 and going to win a National Championship for our program and finishing off this season for this group of guys that have worked really hard.

I haven't really got into that or thought of it that way. I think it's all about this moment and this game and what it means for our program to be participating and have a chance to win a National Championship.

Q. Is there anything that helps Michael with regard to playing Michigan because it was like three years ago that he played them. I know their defense is quite a bit different. How do you see that?

KALEN DEBOER: I mean, maybe. Maybe there's something. I think it's probably a lot has happened since the times that he's played there, and I think they won the game that you're referring to if I remember right, but I think it's just a whole different thing that he's involved with now being here at UW and his teammates and the confidence he has in them and that they have in him, as well. I think it's all about right now.

But if you were playing in their stadium, maybe there would be some familiarity that would help him feel good about it, but we're playing down in Houston. Maybe the colors across from him could be something that could bring back some memories pretty quickly, but I think right now he's also just in the moment and focused on our program and the opportunity at hand.

Q. I know there were some guys like Jabbar Muhammad and Devin Culp and Nate Kalepo who got dinged up but came back in the game. Any lingering concerns with any of those guys?

KALEN DEBOER: No. I think they're all good. I think they're all good. Just sore and things like that. I believe all of them got back in the game at some point after their little dings and nicks. So they should all be good.

Q. Your coordinators are some of the best compensated in the business and you give them a lot of responsibility. Can you explain why that is?

KALEN DEBOER: Yeah. I mean, first of all, these guys, I've known them for not just a couple years but going on 15 to 25, 30 years. Chuck Morrell and I were teammates in college and we coached together for 10 years at Sioux Falls and four years here at Fresno and UW. He's been a part of every single win that I have as I have coached.

Ryan Grubb obviously draws a lot of attention with what we do offensively and the success we've had there, and going back to 2007 we've coached together many different places along the way. He does a great job.

I think the thing about it is when you can give people you trust ownership or a chance to make it theirs, and I'm here to support them and empower our coaching staff, not just them but be there for them, give them all they need, the organization, put the pieces around them to help them be successful, I think they take a lot of ownership and responsibility in doing everything they can to help us be



successful.

I know there's obviously a trust and belief I have in them, and I think it goes both ways in their enjoyment to hopefully work for me, and we get the results we have because of that coordination that we have as a whole.

Q. Kalen, actually piggy-backing on that question, a lot of your guys, including you, were on the staff at Eastern Michigan when they were talking about getting rid of the program. You've gone from the low of the low of the college football world to now the mountaintop, darn near. I'm curious, what did those three years teach you about yourself and about your career moving forward when you were at Eastern Michigan?

KALEN DEBOER: Yeah. Yeah, we do, we've got a couple strength coaches -- actually got three of them, including our head strength coach, Ron McKeefery, Bryan Fink, Zach Cook, and then Ryan Grubb obviously was there with us; Shaq (indiscernible) was a player for us. He was a GA.

Yeah, I think three great years coaching there, a lot of it just has to do with just the people you're around. Chris Creighton, I learned so much from him leading a football team. I had a chance at one point to do it myself, and I think you really pay attention to head coaches and what they do and how they do it.

Every guy has got their different style and way, but those years right there coming into a program that really didn't have a culture at that time, or much tradition at all, and one day at a time being relentless and putting it together and seeing in a couple years what it could become, and obviously that foundation continues to be strong there with what Chris has done.

I'm super proud of his success and how he's got an expectation to have that program in a bowl game. I think it verified a lot of how I felt when I was building a team that already had a lot of good things going for it at Sioux Falls. Picked up a few little pieces along the way to add to what we do.

I've done that I think as a coordinator at the four different stops I had, whether it be Southern Illinois, Indiana, Fresno State, or Eastern Michigan. Each coach gave me a little piece here and there that I've added to what was the key pieces for me to build our program and our culture.

Q. I wonder if you could describe the process of Michael transferring. I recall him saying he watched film of the Washington offensive line before he came, and that offensive line became the best in the country,

but how confident were you of getting him?

KALEN DEBOER: I think the timing wasn't far off. I think he was either thinking about it or entered the portal and the timing of me getting the job here at Washington wasn't far off.

I think he was certainly wondering where I was at, what my quarterback situation would be no matter where I was coaching, whether it be at Fresno State, and then it happened here.

I think as soon as I called him, I think there was probably a feeling in his mind that this was what he hoped would work out, was to come here. Certainly that's the way I felt, as well.

When he came up here and visited it was certainly a business trip for him. Wanted to see everyone around him from the offensive line to the receiving corps. There was not a lot of the glitz and glamour and tours and seeing the city. There was a little bit of that, but it was really getting reacquainted and us trying to show him what we knew at that time, which we were still learning, as well.

Ryan Grubb was on staff here, and they did not know each other so that was important for me to instill that trust in Michael that we'd be doing what we did at Indiana. That would be the foundation.

And then him growing that relationship and me verifying to Michael that the type of Coach Ryan is, too, that he'd be very clear, very concise and work his tail off for you.

But Michael wanted to know the offensive line, who they were going to be. Wanted to make sure he could be protected.

I think he trusted what his talent was and what he could do with the football as long as he had some of those pieces to keep him upright and give him a chance. I did, as well.

I was super excited when he came on board that we'd end up having what we're doing right now, and that's a lot of success with him leading the charge.

Q. Do you have a plan, a binder, a way to transition, recruiting different players as you transition to the Big Ten?

KALEN DEBOER: Yeah, I mean, first of all, our staff has a lot of ties and connections, both to the Midwest and the Big Ten, whether it be coaching there in the Big Ten or just from that region of the country.

I think it will be a transition that's pretty smooth for us that way. We have a lot of familiarity with the type of football that's played and different styles from each program.

We still have to keep, I think, our footprint being the West Coast, but we'll not be afraid to venture off and find the right fit, the guys maybe we have contacts with through head coaches and areas we're very familiar recruiting already.

There's certainly a lot that we already feel we have in this program that fits well with what can compete well in the Big Ten. For us it's about continuing to evolve and just grow and be better at every position and as a collective each and every year.

We reassess that and understand where we're at as a program, but physically I think you get to this point in a playoff, you're facing the best of the best. Obviously we'll learn more about Michigan when we step on the football field against them and where we match up as far as being the best in the Big Ten, as well.

Q. I was wondering what makes Michael such a catalyst for everything, because it seems like obviously he led Indiana to one of its best seasons of all time and then what he's done obviously at Washington, but even going back to that 2020 victory over Michigan, it was the first Indiana victory over Michigan in 33 years. What is it about him that makes him do some things that seem somewhat improbable?

KALEN DEBOER: Yeah, I think the production and then who he is as a person, and on the production piece, he's got a skill set that is -- I think it makes him the best player in the country. The ability to throw the ball with accuracy, he can get rid of it super quick.

There were some throws in the game this last week where he had to slide in the pocket, reset his feet and quick release it, did it from the left side to the right side, did it sliding one way and throwing right down the middle of the field. He's got a quick release.

All those pieces from a skill set standpoint and talent-wise are there.

The production I think is what certainly helps with people buying into him, and then combine that with just a personality that's fun to be around. He's as low ego as it gets. It's all about the team. Everyone hears that publicly when he talks, but it is 100 percent real. It is what we see every single day.

There are things he's doing for his teammates that he

could care less if it got out there in the public. It's all about just loving the moment he's in, wanting this to be a special time for everyone that's around him. He has a lot of trust in people. Once you really become loyal to him, he will do anything for you. That's gone both ways on our team, both he to the team and the team to him.

He's not afraid to get out front and center and give a hard talk, and you can realize pretty quickly how competitive he is and how bad he wants to win a National Championship and that he really believed when he came back that we could be in this moment.

Then lastly, his work supported everything that were his goals all season long. Had a full off-season to really train, a full off-season to work individually to improve, to work with his receivers. He would challenge everyone on this football team to be the best that they can be all the time.

He did that from the time he said he's coming back early last December.

Q. Do you find it somewhat ironic in some ways that the offensive system that you kind of inspired at Indiana and even his play in 2020 pretty much led to what Michigan's defense is now, that defensive change in a lot of ways because of what happened in that game in 2020? Do you gather any sense of irony in that sense that you kind of brought about the defense that you're going to face Monday night?

KALEN DEBOER: I hadn't thought about it that way. As you're talking here, I can I guess kind of see what you're saying. But I don't know if it's one particular game that gets someone to evolve and change. I think it's a lot of other things.

But Michael certainly had a year there at Indiana where he had a lot of success against a lot of different teams.

But yeah, you kind of have to adjust to the people that cause you the most problems. I think the irony is that, yeah, he's playing another Big Ten team that he's faced before. It's a cool moment for us as a team and for him, as well.

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